

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2023**

LUKE 15: 11-32

“A FATHER WHO FORGAVE”

The parable in today’s gospel reading from Luke 15 is often considered the very greatest of Jesus’ many parables. It’s a wonderful story! It’s goes by the title of “The Prodigal Son”. But I think it might be better to give it the title of “The Father Who Forgave”. The father in the Lord’s story is really the most important character----the one who determines how the story turns out.

A quick review of the story-----

A younger son went to his father to ask for his share of the family inheritance---ahead of time, obviously, because the father was still alive. This was quite offensive in the culture of the time, to want your part of the inheritance from a still-living father, but the father let him have it without complaining. The son took the money and went to “a far country” and there quickly squandered all the money on wine, women, and song. He ended flat broke, far from home, and hungry. In desperation, he took a job that paid very little and was most unusual for a Jewish man to work at---feeding swine for a pig farmer. He was paid so poorly that he became so hungry that he was tempted to eat the slop he was feeding the pigs! Then one day he realized what he should do. He thought about the fact that back home his fathers’ servants were treated well and paid fairly----and here he, the son, was stuck in a pigpen. He figured his father would not take him back as a son after all he had done, but maybe he would just hire him on as one of his servants---that would sure be better than his current situation! So he got out of the pigpen and started the long walk home.

And now we get to the climax of the story----what will the father do when he sees his son coming down the road to the house? Will he totally reject him and chase him away? Will he consent to let him be another of his servants even if he won’t take him back as a son? The father goes with a third possibility--- He totally forgives his son and takes him fully back into the family with great joy. Sure, he could have rejected the son, but he was not that kind of father. In his happiness at seeing his son approaching the house, he couldn’t even wait for him to get to the door. He ran down the road to greet him and to hug him—even if he did smell like a pigpen!

Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher from about 300 B.C., wrote that a dignified man should never run. It is just too awkward and undignified. It makes a man look silly. (Father Anthony Coniaris, The Message of the Sunday Gospel Readings, Volume I, p. 135)

The father in the story either hadn't read Aristotle or didn't care what he wrote. He ran! He ran to his wayward son to embrace him, forgive him, and welcome him home---he even threw him a party!

Old Chinese culture was similar to Aristotle in believing that a man's running was a very undignified thing to do. A dignified man just didn't do it. Back in the pre-Communist times, there were many Christian missionaries at work in China. One young artist was converted to belief in Christ by a missionary who was also a painter, so they became good friends. The young man wanted to paint a picture of some parable, so the missionary recommended doing some scene about the prodigal son. The artist chose to show the return home----in his painting you see both the son and the father as the son approaches the house.

The young man had the missionary painter look at his work so as to give an opinion about it. He said, "Artistically, it's wonderful but you might wish to change it some because it's not accurate. It shows the father in his doorway waiting for the son to get to the house----but the Bible says he ran down the road to welcome him back." The young artist said, "But a Chinese man never runs! It's not dignified! But I will go ahead and change it." A few days later the older artist returned to see the revised painting----he was happy to see it showed the father running full speed (in a very undignified manner!) down the road to greet his son. But after praising it, he said, "You did make one little mistake, though, that you might wish to fix. You slipped up and gave the father non-matching shoes----on one foot he has a black shoe, and on the other foot he has a white shoe." The young artist replied, "Oh, no, that wasn't a mistake, that was on purpose. The man was in such a crazy hurry to go greet his son that he put the wrong shoes on!"

The neighbors that day may have been shocked by such undignified actions by the father, but he didn't care----all he cared about was that his son had come home!

How the father reacted is the key point of the story. And in this parable, who does the father stand for? Of course, God the Father.

And who does the Prodigal Son stand for? He stands for us when we fall into sin. When we sin, we are running away from home. We are blowing away our inheritance! And if we head back home, God doesn't stand on His

dignity and refuse to take us back. He is watching for us to take one step back in his direction. And when we do that, He comes running to us to joyfully receive us home. Because of our sins, we may stink like a pigpen, but God embraces us anyway!

A detail from the sacrament of Confession shows this about God. In Confession, we are like the Prodigal Son coming home after having run away through our sinning. During the sacrament the priest takes his epitrachelion (stole) and drapes it over us. That stands for God embracing us, putting his arms around us to welcome us home. He doesn't kick us or shove us away. He doesn't reject us, He embraces us---just like in the parable.

So the father is the most important character in the story. Everything hinges on him---What is he like? What will he do? He forgave. And our heavenly Father is also a forgiving father.

Some have some false ideas about God, maybe some that are here this morning. They think of God as being mostly angry, punishing, frightening. Watching over us from on high with a lightning bolt in hand to throw at us if we get out of line. Not much like the father Jesus tells us about in today's gospel lesson!

If you think that way about God, you are mistaken. Somewhere along the line, you got mixed up. Maybe something in your own experiences caused you to think that way. Maybe you misunderstood some difficult Bible passages. Maybe you just got taught some untrue things about God.

The Bible tells us in I John 4:8 what God is like---"God is love." And our Orthodox Tradition is clear---our God is a perfectly loving and forgiving father. He is not out to get us. Of course, sometimes He disciplines us and punishes us for our own good, just like a good earthly father does. And sometimes it is hard for us to understand that the discipline and punishment is part of His love for us.

Our great Church Father from about 1400 years ago, St. Isaac the Syrian, in one of his sermons (Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 29, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011), talks about when the Bible has terminology about God's anger, etc. St. Isaac says such language is not literally true. Such things as anger are "far removed from His true nature". He teaches us that all of God's actions are in reality matters of *mercy*. Punishment and discipline are part of His total love for us.

So when we sin....and then decide to go back home, God runs towards us...not to beat us, but to embrace us.

Are you in a pig pen in your life? Get up, and head down the road back home. Home to your Father. And He will joyfully come running down the road to welcome you back.